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**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
Newport, R.I.**

**A GREAT WAR  
MORE WORTHY OF RELATION THAN ANY THAT HAD PRECEDED IT**

**THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR AS A ROSETTA STONE FOR  
JOINT WARFARE AND OPERATIONAL ART**

by

**Kevin M. McGowan**

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**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.**

**Signature: \_\_\_\_\_**

**16 June 2006**

## **Abstract**

The study of military history is a vital component of Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) as a complement to the study of Joint Doctrine. The Joint Military Operations Historical Collection (JMOHC) illustrates principles of Joint Doctrine and Joint Force Employment through historical and modern example of U.S. Joint Force Operations.

Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War is recognized dogmatically as a definitive text with regard to the study of National Strategy and Policy, international relations, and political science. In addition to being the first true military historian, many regard Thucydides as the father of the study of International Relations, and the first writer in the intellectual tradition of Realism. This paper proposes that Thucydides history of the 27 year long Peloponnesian War is not only important to Strategic level of military studies, but is equally applicable to the military studies at the Operational level of war. Thucydides history is the first account of complex Joint Military Operations (JMO) in a major conflict between the joint forces (land and sea) of multi-national coalitions fighting in multiple theaters (sometimes simultaneously) across multiple domains. This paper will demonstrate that the fundamentals of Joint Force Employment were clearly validated in the Peloponnesian War as the outcome at key decisive points (Major Operations) was ultimately determined by superior (or inferior) operational execution when examined within the frameworks of the Principles of War and Center of Gravity at the Operational level.

Finally, this paper will draw conclusions as to which principles of Joint Force Employment were the most determinant in the Peloponnesian War and draw lessons learned based upon these conclusions as to the enduring importance of the Principles of War and Operational Art for Joint Force Planning and Joint Force Employment in the modern era.

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## INTRODUCTION

*“The military student does not seek to learn from history the minutiae of method and technique. In every age, these are decisively influenced by the characteristics of weapons readily available and by the means at hand for maneuvering, supplying, and controlling combat forces. But research does bring to light those fundamental principles and their combinations and applications, which in the past, have been productive of success. These principles have no limitation of time. Consequently the army extends its analytical interest to the dust buried accounts of wars long past as well as to those still reeking with the scent of battle.”*

*General Douglas MacArthur  
1935 Report to Sec of Army*

The study of military history is a vital component of Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) as an indispensable complement to the study of Joint Doctrine. The Joint Military Operations Historical Collection (JMOHC) illustrates Joint Force Employment through historical and modern example of U.S. Joint Operations. The JMOHC uses the Battle of Vicksburg, the beaches of Inchon, and the sands of Operation DESERT STORM as case studies to demonstrate the fundamental principles of Joint Military Operations (JMO) at the Operational level of war.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, Thucydides’ history of the Peloponnesian War (431-405 BCE) has come to be recognized dogmatically as the seminal case for the study of Strategy and Policy, International Relations, and Political Science at the National/Strategic level. In addition to being the first true military historian, many regard Thucydides as the father of the study of International Relations, and the first writer in the intellectual tradition of Realism.<sup>2</sup>

This paper proposes that Thucydides’ history of the 27 year long Peloponnesian War is not only a “sacred” text for the Strategic level of military studies, but is equally valuable as a

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Military Operations Historical Collection (Washington, DC, July 15, 1997), i.

<sup>2</sup> Paul R. Viotti and Mark V. Kauppi, International Relations and World Politics: Security, Economy, Identity, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2001), 42.

“Rosetta Stone”<sup>3</sup> for military studies at the Operational Level of war. In addition to being the first and “greatest” JMO case study, this paper will argue the primacy of Thucydides’ work at the Operational level by examining the fundamental principles of Joint Force Employment illustrated in the Peloponnesian War. The enduring value of the great historian’s work at the Operational level of war will be further demonstrated in the fact that the outcome at strategically decisive points in the Peloponnesian War (and ultimately victory in the war overall) was the result of superior Operational Art when examined within the frameworks of the Principles of War and Operational Centers of Gravity as opposed to victory stemming purely from the selection of a superior strategy.

Finally, this paper will draw conclusions as to which principles of Joint Force Employment were the most determinant in the Peloponnesian War and propose lessons learned from these conclusions as to the enduring importance of the Principles of War and Operational Art for Joint Force Planning and Joint Force Employment in the modern era. Due to the universality of the Thucydides’ text in JPME and other curricula, this paper assumes a modicum of familiarity with the Peloponnesian war on the part of the reader.

### **A GREAT [JOINT] WAR, MORE WORTHY OF RELATION THAN ANY OTHER**

*“Thucydides, an Athenian, wrote the history of the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians... believing that it would be a great war, more worthy of relation than any that had preceded it. The preparations of both the combatants were in every department in the last state of perfection with the rest of the Hellenic race taking sides in the quarrel.”*

*Thucydides (1.1)*

*“...useful to those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the understanding of the future... I have written my work as a possession for all time.”*

*Thucydides (1.22)*

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<sup>3</sup> The Rosetta stone is an ancient stone artifact with writing inscribed on it in two languages (Egyptian and Greek) using three scripts (Hieroglyph, Egyptian, and Greek). As a metaphor it is used to describe something that is a key to translating, decoding, or understanding a difficult problem.

Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War is the first recorded case study of complex Joint Military Operations (JMO) in a major conflict between the Joint forces (land and sea) of multi-national coalitions fighting in multiple theaters (sometimes simultaneously) across multiple domains. Being the oldest JMO case study (written by the first military historian) does not in itself make the Peloponnesian War the "greatest" JMO case study; but being the first, while validating the same doctrinal Principles of War in use today does imply a primordial but enduring quality that may at least support inclusion "great" category. The enduring quality of Thucydides is further validated by the fact that another military case study of similar scale, complexity, and "jointness" in the modern sense would not emerge for another 2000 years until the Napoleonic era.

The combatants in the Peloponnesian War were undeniably "Joint" forces from a U.S. Joint Doctrine perspective in that the forces were "composed of significant elements... of two or more Military Departments, operating under a single joint force commander."<sup>4</sup> This was just as true in the case of the Athenian expedition to Epidaurus with a large multi-national Joint force (150 triremes with 4000 hoplites and 300 cavalry in designated horse transports) under the unified command of Pericles in just the second year of the war (430 BCE)<sup>5</sup> as it would be at the end of the war with the Peloponnesian forces under the unified command of the Spartan admiral, Lysander at Aegospotami (405 BCE) where the outcome would ultimately be decided.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Doctrine for Joint Operations (JP 3-0) (Washington, DC, September 10, 2001), GL-11.

<sup>5</sup> Thucydides, Robert Strassler, ed. The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War, (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 2.56, p. 122.

<sup>6</sup> Karl F. Walling, Reader's Guide to Key Leaders, Battles, Cities, and Concepts of the Peloponnesian War. Naval War College, 2002, (NWC reprint)

The Peloponnesian War was doctrinally illustrative of Joint Warfare in the modern sense in that it consisted of a series of Major Operations executed by Joint Forces within Theater Campaigns in order to achieve theater-strategic military objectives in support of larger national aims and political objectives.<sup>7</sup>

## **STRATEGIC CONTEXT OF THE WAR – AN ANCIENT SECURITY DILEMMA**

*“The truest cause, however, I consider to be the one which was formally most kept out of sight. The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta, made war inevitable”.*  
*Thucydides (1.23.6)*

Thucydides’ focus on underlying forces, human nature, and the recurring nature of war more than the immediate causes or pretexts for war combined with his Realist notion of Balance of Power driven by “fear, honor, and interest” would make him the founding father of the study of International Relations.<sup>8</sup> Without delving too far into the realm of political science, an understanding of the strategic context of the Peloponnesian War (national aims, political objectives, and military strategies) as described by Thucydides is needed before pressing into analysis at the Operational level within the frameworks of Operational Art and the fundamentals of Joint Warfare.

While some of the national aims and political objectives were explicitly outlined by Thucydides, others are more implicit and need to be inferred from the historical actions of the belligerents and from the many speeches used in the great historian’s narrative. Thucydides addresses his use of speeches, wherein he made the speakers “say what was demanded of them by the occasion... adhering as close as possible to what they really said.”<sup>9</sup> When drawing strategic inferences from the speeches it is important for the reader to consider not only the

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<sup>7</sup> Milan N. Vego, Operational Warfare, (Naval War College, 2001), 637.

<sup>8</sup> Paul R. Viotti and Mark V. Kauppi, International Relations Theory: Realism, Pluralism, Globalism, and Beyond, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, (Allyn & Bacon: Needham Heights, MA, 1999), 57.

<sup>9</sup> Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, 1.22.



orator and his audience(s) but also the intent of the specific speech. As an example, it is only natural that Archidamus' speech to the Spartan Ephors recommending against war with Athens would outline different strategic recommendations than his later speeches to the assembly after war had already been declared upon Athens by Sparta and her allies.

The strategic context of the Hellenic/Mediterranean world in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE was that of a bipolar system with a rising power in Athens and a declining hegemon in Sparta (and the Peloponnesian League) as was described by Thucydides in his "truest cause of the war" thesis. A fair amount academic energy (some of which is arguably revisionist) has been expended in recent decades in an effort to discredit Thucydides' thesis on the origins of the war. That specific debate however, is beyond the scope of this paper's Operational level of analysis as this paper's focus is more on the "What" and "How", than the "Why". As in the case of modern-day conflicts between major powers, regardless of the origin of the war, the belligerents developed military strategies to achieve strategic objectives in support of national aims. Those national aims exist on a continuum that ranges from limited (minimum acceptable) to unlimited (take it if you can get it) and can fluctuate during a conflict.<sup>10</sup>

Without getting into the details of the "Corcyran affair" with Corinth, Athens' political objective at the limited end of the scale might best be described as *status quo ante bello* with Athens atop the Delian League and the pre-war balance of (specifically naval) power intact.<sup>11</sup> Towards the unlimited end of the spectrum, Athenian aims were nothing less than complete hegemony over the Mediterranean to be achieved via northwest expansion of Athenian influence (and empire) across the Megarid isthmus through the Gulf of Corinth out to Sicily and beyond.

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<sup>10</sup> Karl F. Walling, Thucydides on Strategy – 2005, lecture notes from Thucydides elective, (Naval War College, November, 2005), 5.

<sup>11</sup> Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, 1.33-36

The national aims of Sparta with regard to Athens tended more towards the unlimited end of the spectrum from the very onset of the Peloponnesian War as there was an arguably preventative/pre-emptive component to the Spartan decision for war. The unlimited national aim of Sparta was explicitly spelled out by Thucydides himself when he repeats his thesis on the origins of the war for the third time. That strategic objective was nothing less than the destruction of the Athenian empire.

*“Finally, the growth of Athenian power could no longer be ignored... They [Sparta] then felt that they could endure it no longer, but that the time had come for them to throw themselves heart and soul upon the hostile power[Athens], and break it, if they could, by commencing the present war.”*  
Thucydides (1.118)

If Sparta could have had a more limited objective that would have still supported their national aims, it would be very similar to the Athenian limited aim of *status quo ante* but with the Peloponnesian League (including Corinth) intact and the “power” of Athens no longer expanding.

Through the speech of the Corinthians, Thucydides describes the nature of Athenian character as aggressive and expansionist – “born into the world to take no rest themselves and to give none to others.”<sup>12</sup> The Athenian envoys who happen to be present offer nothing in their speech that might convince the Spartans that Athenian character is anything but aggressive. The envoys even go so far as to foreshadow elements of the famous “Melian dialogue”, noting that “...it has always been the law that the weaker should be subject to the stronger.”<sup>13</sup> Given this tension between Athenian “motion” and Peloponnesian “rest” and Thucydides other statements that the “war was inevitable” and “a necessity”, it is unlikely that the Spartans could have accepted a more limited national aim short of dismantling the Athenian empire.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, 1.70.9

<sup>13</sup> Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, 1.76

<sup>14</sup> Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, 1.44, 1.144.

## OPERATIONAL ART AND CENTERS OF GRAVITY

U.S. Joint doctrine defines centers of gravity (COG) as “those characteristics, capabilities, or sources of power from which a military force derives its freedom of action, physical strength, or will to fight.”<sup>15</sup> With this definition in mind, an analysis of the critical factors (strengths and weaknesses) of Athens and Sparta described explicitly and implicitly in Thucydides account of the war illuminates the strategic and operational COGs on each side of the conflict.

The Athenian COG was the nexus of the Athenian fleet and her empire (allies/tribute). Thucydides explicitly identifies this Athenian COG in the second speech of Pericles using language nearly identical to the definition of COG in US Joint doctrine.

*“...get ready the fleet, in which real strength lay...and keep a tight rein on their allies – the strength of Athens being derived from the money brought by their payments, and success in war depending principally upon conduct and capital.”*  
*Thucydides (2.13)*  
*[Emphasis added]*

Athens’ unique COG was the product of a true Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) exercised under the leadership Themistocles following the First Peloponnesian War. Themistocles not only rebuilt Athens following the defeat of Persia but also fortified the Piraeus (harbor) and built long walls connecting Athens with the sea. Those walls combined with an unrivaled control of the sea transformed Athens into a “virtual island” invulnerable to attack and free to expand indefinitely.<sup>16</sup>

The Spartan COG consisted of two interrelated critical factors – a strength and a weakness. The critical strength was the Spartan army, the finest in all of Greece and the product of a unique martial culture where all males were taken shortly after birth and raised in

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<sup>15</sup> U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Doctrine for Joint Operations (JP 3-0) (Washington, DC, September 10, 2001), GL-5.

<sup>16</sup> Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, 1.92.3.

the regiment as hoplites - less than perfect male infants being eliminated by “exposure”.<sup>17</sup> The critical weakness was Sparta’s dependency on a large slave population of helots that outnumbered the Spartans 8:1. Sparta’s unique martial culture and regimented way of life could only be sustained through their dependence upon the helots for agriculture as every Spartan was a soldier rather than a farmer. The constant fear of a domestic helot revolt would always affect Sparta’s ability/ willingness to use the army for very long or very far away and would subsequently drive strategy and operational design.

### **OPERATIONAL DESIGN AND COMMANDER’S GUIDANCE – ATHENS/SPARTA**

After identifying the strategic aims and desired end states of the belligerents; an analysis of COGs in concert with Operational Factors (Space, Time, and Force) is used to produce an Operational Design for a campaign in a given theater.<sup>18</sup> In the Peloponnesian War, both Athens (Pericles) and Sparta (Archidamus) recognized from the beginning that the asymmetry between their respective instruments of war (Whale vs. **Elephant**) would tend to protract the conflict. This aspect of the operational factor pairing of Time-Force would influence the operational design and military strategies of both belligerents. In order to overcome the Force asymmetry, Archidamus immediately recognized that the Spartan “elephant” would have to become/acquire a large navy through alliances and that the Athenian “whale” would have to do the same in pursuit of an army.<sup>19</sup> Athens intentionally did not maintain a large standing army for both fiscal and domestic political reasons. Fiscally, Athens could not afford both a large standing army and a large navy; politically a large standing army could be dangerous in the pure democracy of Athens.

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<sup>17</sup> Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, 1.77.6

<sup>18</sup> Milan N. Vego, Operational Warfare, (Naval War College, 2001), 309, 641.

<sup>19</sup> Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, 1.82.

Pericles very succinctly outlined an Operational Design through his equivalent of a three part Commander's Guidance to the Athenians. The first element of Pericles' guidance was rooted in the aforementioned force asymmetry and friendly/enemy COG analysis.

*"...sailing into their country [Sparta] and raising fortifications there, making reprisals with our powerful fleet. For our naval skill is of more use to us for service on land than their military skill for service at sea. If they march against our country, we will sail against theirs, and it will then be found that the desolation of the whole of Attica is not the same as that of even a fraction of the Peloponnesus."*

*Thucydides (1.143.3)  
[Emphasis added]*

The second element of Pericles' guidance emphasizes Themistocles' RMA of the Piraeus/long walls and was also related to the force asymmetry and COG.

*"Dismissing all thought of our land and houses, we must vigilantly guard the sea and the city. No irritation... must provoke us to a [land] battle with the numerical superiority of the Peloponnesians. A victory would only be succeeded by another battle against the same superiority; a reverse involves the loss of our allies, the source of our strength, who will not remain quiet a day if we are unable to march against them."*

*Thucydides (1.143.5)  
[Emphasis added]*

The third element of Pericles's guidance, arguably the most important, centered on avoiding self-defeating action.

*"...a favorable outcome if you [Athens] can consent not to combine schemes of fresh conquest with the conduct of the war...I am more afraid of our own blunder than of the enemy's devices."*

*Thucydides (1.144)  
[Emphasis added]*

Pericles was old enough to remember the first Peloponnesian war and the debacle in Egypt where Athens threw away two whole fleets in campaigns against the Egyptians and Phoenicians while still embroiled in a major war of survival at home with Persia.<sup>20</sup>

This final component of Pericles' operational design has been misconstrued by some to ascribe a purely defensive "win by not losing" strategy to Pericles. Some have even used the term "Periclean" in the nominative sense in the same way one might use the term "Fabian" to describe a defensive strategy. Such an analysis is shallow and fails to recognize Pericles'

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<sup>20</sup> Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War ,1.104.

significant emphasis on the principle of the Offensive in the first four years of the war until his untimely death (427 BCE). Within the letter and spirit of his Commander's guidance, Athens continued to siege Potidaea, conducted semi-annual heavy attacks against Megara with a full joint force (13,000 hoplites, cavalry, and light troops with 150 triremes), and Pericles himself led a massive joint campaign to Epidaurus on the Peloponnesus proper.<sup>21</sup> These efforts were far from actions that could be considered purely defensive.

Athens' most important military objective (theater-strategic) for the entirety of the Peloponnesian war was Megara (on the isthmus between Sparta and Athens). Megara was geostrategically important to Athens for both offensive and defensive reasons. Defensively, if Athens could control the Megarid there would be no land bridge by which Sparta could march to Attica; and Sparta would be divided from her ally Thebes. Offensively, control of the isthmus would afford Athens a much shorter route to the Northwest (Sicily via Corcyra) through the Gulf of Corinth expanding Athenian hegemony through trade, influence and empire into the western Mediterranean.

Archidamus, the Spartan King, outlined the beginnings of the long-term Operational Design that Sparta would ultimately need to pursue while still arguing against going to war with Athens. In analyzing the Athenian critical strengths/COG within the Operational Factors of Space-Time-Force, Archidamus fully recognized the force asymmetry and the likely protracted nature of a war with Athens. His initial guidance was to delay and prepare.

*“...employ the interval in perfecting our own preparations... [F]irst, the acquisition of allies, Hellenic or barbarian it matters not, so long as they are an accession to our strength naval or financial – after a lapse of two or three years our position will become materially strengthened and we can attack them if we think proper.* Thucydides (1.82)

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<sup>21</sup> Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, 2.65.5.

Unable to dissuade the Spartan ephors under the influence of the Peloponnesian allies from voting for war, Archidamus was forced to develop both a short term and long term Operational design. In the short term, the Spartans will invade/ravage Attica despite the COG analysis and unlikelihood of strategic impact. The decision to invade/ravage Attica despite the force asymmetry was a political decision necessitated by a pre-war agreement with Potidea (an Athenian colony in revolt) in order to maintain the alliances of the Peloponnesian League (specifically Corinth).<sup>22</sup>

While Archidamus did not specifically dictate Commander's Guidance, the long term Spartan operational design would also be spelled also – coincidentally, also in three parts. The first element of long term Spartan strategy called for raising a fleet just as Archidamus had alluded to – a must for effecting the Athenian COG.

*“The naval strength which they possess shall be raised by us from our respective present resources, and from the moneys at Olympia and Delphi. ...seduce their foreign sailors by the offer of higher pay. For the power of Athens is more mercenary than national;”*  
Thucydides (1.121)

The second element of the Spartan operational design was directed at the second half of the enemy COG – the allies/empire of Athens.

*“We also have other ways of carrying on the war, such as revolt of their [Athens'] allies, the surest method of depriving them of their revenues, which are the source of their strength, “*  
Thucydides (1.122)  
[Emphasis added]

A third element of the long term Spartan operational design against Athens involved sustained forward offensive with “the establishment of fortified positions in their [Athens'] country.” (1.122) This third element of operational design shared some commonality with the Athenian operational design against Sparta but was not as directly related to the Athenian COG. One instance however, when the Spartan fortification of positions within Athenian territory was

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<sup>22</sup> Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War ,1.71.4.

strategically significant because it was directly related to the Athenian COG was the Spartan fortification of Decalea south of Athens/Attica. Decalea was the site of the Athenian silver mines and subsequently more closely connected to the complex Athenian COG of “Fleet/Finances/Empire” because of the income it produced.

## **DECISIVE CAMPAIGNS – PRINCIPLES OF WAR AND CENTERS OF GRAVITY**

The bedrocks upon which the foundation of U.S. joint military doctrine is built are the fundamental Principle of War – Objective, Offensive, Mass, Economy of Force, Maneuver, Unity of Command, Security, Surprise, and Simplicity.<sup>23</sup> Not unlike World War II, the “greatness” (magnitude, duration, complexity, and “jointness”) of the Peloponnesian war was such that there are innumerable major operations or campaigns that can be cited to illustrate principles of war. The strategically decisive campaigns however, were typified by superior operational execution across ALL nine principles while being focused specifically at the COG. Two campaigns of the Peloponnesian war however, stand out as more strategically decisive than any others – Pylos/Sphacteria and Aegospotami.

Demosthenes’ campaign at Pylos/Sphacteria would be the most strategically decisive Athenian victory of the Peloponnesian war as it would drive Sparta to sue for peace. Pylos/Sphacteria also illustrated superior execution of joint warfighting fundamentals across the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. The operational design of Demosthenes at Pylos/Sphacteria was to invade and fortify Pylos - a small coastal island (nearly peninsular) with good harbor and terrain naturally suited for defense ~40 nm from Sparta.

*“...this place was distinguished from others of the kind by having a harbor close by; while the Messenians, the old natives of the country speaking the same dialect as the Spartans, could do them the greatest harm by their incursions from it and would at the same be a trusty garrison.”*  
*Thucydides (4.3.3)*

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<sup>23</sup> U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Doctrine for Joint Operations (JP 3-0) (Washington, DC, September 10, 2001), II-1.



The objective of Demosthenes' offensive was to gain an operational foothold in the Peloponnesus using Surprise and a relatively small force containing Messenian proxy elements (Economy of Force) from which the Athenians could incite helot revolt in Sparta proper. Athens used indirect action to exploit a critical vulnerability for a direct impact on the Spartan COG. When Sparta learned that Demosthenes had taken and fortified Pylos, Agis (Sparta's King/General) marched the Spartan army immediately away from their ravage of Attica to address the situation in Pylos.<sup>24</sup>

Demosthenes exercised absolute Unity of Command over his force which was initially very lean (Economy of Force) - only five triremes had been left behind with a multinational (Athenian/Messenian) garrison of hoplites, archers, and sailors numbering in the hundreds vice thousands. As the Peloponnesians prepared for attack, Demosthenes embraced the principles of Security and Mass to defend his position. After sending two ships to the Athenian fleet for reinforcement, Demosthenes protected his remaining triremes by hauling them behind a stockade within his small fortifications. Recognizing that he was going to be attacked by land and sea simultaneously, Demosthenes positioned his sailors and less experienced troops at his most fortified and least vulnerable interior positions with orders to repel any land attack. To seaward, he massed his remaining hoplites and archers outside the walls where the terrain dictated that the enemy was most likely to attack. Demosthenes successfully defended Pylos for two days on two fronts against the numerically superior Spartans. Thucydides noted:

*"It was a strange reversal of the order of things for Athenians to be fighting from the land and from Laconian [Spartan] land too, against Spartans coming from the sea; while Spartans were trying to land shipboard in their own country, now become hostile, to attack Athenians, although the former were chiefly famous at the time as an inland people and superior by land, the latter as a maritime people with a navy that had no equal."*

*Thucydides (4.12)*

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<sup>24</sup> Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, 1.71.4.

After being initially repelled, as the Spartans were preparing to lay siege to Pylos from the adjacent island of Sphacteria when the Athenian fleet arrived with 50 triremes (mass and maneuver) and destroyed the Spartan fleet within the bay. The massed Spartan attack force was then isolated on the island of Sphacteria. Among the trapped garrison were 120 Spartiates, the elite “noble lifeblood” of Sparta. Shock and alarm in Sparta was such that Sparta felt compelled to call for an immediate armistice so that envoys could sail to Athens to sue for peace – a strategically decisive turn of events.<sup>25</sup> Had Athens been willing to negotiate reasonably with the Spartan envoys instead of being incited by the political demagogue Cleon, it is likely that the war would have ended 20 years earlier with a decidedly different outcome – Athens continuing to rise and Spartan decline (*status quo ante*).

In the second half of the Athenian campaign at Pylos/Sphacteria, Demosthenes (joined by Cleon) would defeat the Peloponnesians on Sphacteria through superbly executed joint operations across the nine principles of war. Athens would take the Spartiates as valuable hostages to secure Attica from future ravage. Ironically the effect of the Spartiate hostages would actually drive the Peloponnesians (no longer able to ravage Attica) into operational designs that would more directly attack the Athenian COG as would happen at Amphipolis. Exercising unity of command and economy of force, Brasidas would lead a disposal force of helot mercenaries and take Amphipolis – a key position along the Athenian grain SLOC to the Hellespont – pressuring Athens COG considerably.<sup>26</sup>

Ultimately the most strategically decisive campaign of the entire war would be the Spartan victory at Aegospotami in the 27<sup>th</sup> year of the war. Athens, with all of her empire in revolt, would lose her fleet and eventually be starved into submission from the sea. At

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<sup>25</sup> Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, 4.3-26.

<sup>26</sup> Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, 4.104.1-5.

Aegospotami, the Spartan Admiral Lysander exercised Unity of Command as the sole commander of the Peloponnesians in the campaign in contrast with the Athenians who had divided command among 6 different generals following a civil-military breakdown. Lysander was able to raise a fleet of sufficient Mass to match the Athenians using Persian funds and Spartan hoplites. Embracing the primacy of the principle of Objective, Lysander's entire campaign was focused on the Hellespont (modern day Dardanelles/Bosporus) the sole remaining grain SLOC of Athens and key to the Athenian COG at the end of the war.

Unable to strike at the Hellespont directly because of the Athenian fleet at Samos, Lysander exercised the principle of the Offensive, attacking Athenian interests in Aegina and Salamis compelling the Athenian fleet to give chase. Lysander embodied the principle of Maneuver, sailing around the Athenian fleet (engaged in the west) to reach the Hellespont in the north. Lysander built secure bases in the Hellespont at Abydos and Lampsacus while the Athenians arriving afterwards operated with less Security from the beaches of Sestos with no defensible harbor. Lysander exercised the principle of Surprise on the day of the battle when, after refusing battle for days, he sailed out after the Athenians had returned to their forage for food. Lysander managed to capture or destroy nearly all of the Athenian ships on the beach and would then execute ~4000 Athenian hoplites and sailors. The Athenian fleet was destroyed with only nine ships surviving. Without a fleet and with the grain from the Hellespont secured, Athens would eventually be starved into submission.

## **OPERATIONAL LESSONS FOR THE MODERN-DAY HOPLITE COMMANDER**

Several of the lessons learned that are readily drawn from Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War as a JMO case study are as applicable to joint warfare in the modern era as

they were to the ancients. The first of these lessons has to do with what is really required to achieve strategically decisive results – the primacy of the Objective.

The strategist will argue that victory is ultimately determined by strategy and that operational excellence will founder if not executed within a sound strategy. Some operational commanders will argue that superior operational art will beget victory regardless and that a properly aligned strategy only streamlines the operational effort. While much of this debate is a matter of semantics between the strategic and operational levels, the empirical lessons of Athens/Sparta validate the principles of joint doctrine. For a major operation or theater campaign to be strategically decisive in support of a larger national aim it is not enough to have superior operational execution across the full framework of the Principles of War. In order to achieve strategically decisive results, that superior operational execution must be directly focused upon the enemy COG as was the case with Demosthenes at Pylos/Spacteria and Lysander at Aegospotami. The strategic blunder of the Sicilian Expedition, while a departure from the Commander's Guidance (as a scheme of fresh conquest within the conduct of the war) was not a strategically decisive as is typically asserted – Athens would rebuild the fleet and the war would continue for another 9 years. The devastating loss of Athenian combat power at Syracuse, while devastating, was not as directly linked to the Athenian COG as Sicily was not part of the Athenian alliance system from which she drew her “strength and will to fight”. The disaster of Syracuse was only indirectly linked to Athen's eventual defeat in that Persia would finally enter the war on the side of Sparta whereby the “whale could become an elephant”.

A second very clear lesson from the Peloponnesian War that is equally applicable to the modern era of joint warfighting is the importance of operational leadership. Quite simply, leadership matters and it matters as much now as it did in ancient times. Strategically decisive

victories in the Peloponnesian war were invariably achieved under the operational leadership of great JTF Commanders like Demosthenes, Brasidas, and Lysander – dynamic risk takers of supreme character who understood Operational Art and the primacy of the Objective.

Conversely, strategically decisive defeats or inconsequential victories were generally linked to leaders who, while strong in many respects, usually suffered tragic flaws or imbalances in one or more aspects of their character – Nicias, Alcibiades, Cleon.

As Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian war is part of the curricula for many JPME courses of instruction and is listed prominently on most military reading lists, the debate as to where it best fits within military studies might seem to be superfluous to some. But, the lessons learned from any great work are not just a matter of the application of a particular discipline (i.e. historian, classicist, strategist) but are also a matter of perspective and level of analysis. Just as it would take a Rosetta Stone to reconcile the lost languages and texts of ancient times, it might take an ancient text of military history to revalidate the fundamentals of Joint Operations with regard to the truly timeless nature of those truths worthy of recognition as Principles of War.

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